

An abstract painting by Rénold Laurent, featuring a vertical, elongated, and somewhat symmetrical form. The composition is dominated by deep blues, greens, and earthy reds, with accents of yellow and white. The brushwork is expressive and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is one of complex, organic structure, possibly representing a face or a stylized figure in profile, though the forms are highly abstract and layered.

MEMORY WORK

Rénold Laurent

2019 HEIMARK ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

FEBRUARY 15-MAY 10, 2019

Gallery at the Center for the
Study of Slavery & Justice
Brown University

FRONT COVER IMAGE:

MUTATION | *MUTATION*

2001, Oil on Canvas, 24"x 58"

MEMORY WORK

Rénold Laurent | 2019 Heimarck Artist In Residence

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DÉCLARATION D'ARTISTE

Mon sujet principal est la communication à différents niveaux: qu'il s'agisse d'un dialogue entre les matériaux et les médias avec lesquels je choisis de travailler, d'un dialogue interne entre les différentes collections de mon œuvre ou d'un dialogue avec les spectateurs de mon œuvre. Le véhicule du dialogue me permet de mettre en conversation des concepts spécifiques tels que «mémoire», «résistance» et «spiritualité», démontrant ainsi que ces concepts ne s'excluent pas mutuellement—comment ils dépendent l'un de l'autre.

J'utilise différents matériaux, classiques et non conventionnels. En fonction du domaine dans lequel je travaille, je privilégierai certains matériaux par rapport à d'autres. Par exemple, le domaine le plus récent implique une technique spécifique dans laquelle je déploie des supports mixtes—comprenant, sans toutefois s'y limiter, tissu, charbon de bois, résine et parfois même du marc de café—afin de créer une sorte de récupération. Et par récupération, je veux dire comment je réutilise et transforme finalement ces matériaux. Dans ce type de récupération, j'espère expliquer comment l'imagination artistique peut compenser les difficultés économiques auxquelles se heurtent nombre de pauvres pour acquérir ou acheter des objets matériels. J'essaie de respecter et de protéger mon environnement local en réutilisant et en recyclant des matériaux qui sont souvent mis au rebut et facilement accessibles. J'essaie aussi de garder les souvenirs vivants de cette façon.

«Memory Work» assemble un ensemble de peintures réalisées sur plusieurs années. Les plus récents ont été peints dans le cadre du programme d'artiste en résidence Heimark 2019 du Centre pour l'étude de l'esclavage et de la justice de l'Université Brown. «Memory Work» examine comment différents matériaux, de la peinture à l'huile et de l'acrylique au marc de café, entament un dialogue artistique l'un avec l'autre et donnent un nouveau sens à l'espace et au temps.

—Rénold Laurent

ARTIST STATEMENT

Essentially, my subject matter is communication on various levels: whether it's dialogue between the materials and the media I choose to work with, an intra-dialogue among the various collections of my oeuvre, or a dialogue with the viewers of my oeuvre. The vehicle of dialogue allows me to put specific concepts such as “memory,” “resistance,” and “spirituality” in conversation with one another, thereby demonstrating how these concepts are not mutually exclusive—how they, in fact, depend on one another.

I use different materials—both conventional and nonconventional. Depending on what domain I'm working in, I will privilege certain materials over others. For example, the most recent domain involves a specific technique in which I deploy mixed media—including, but not limited to, cloth, charcoal, resin, and sometimes even coffee grounds—in order to create a kind of recuperation. And by recuperation I mean how I ultimately reuse and transform these materials. In this kind of recuperation, I hope to convey how artistic imagination can compensate for the economic limitations many poor people have in acquiring or buying material objects in the first place. I try to respect and protect my local environment by reusing and recycling materials that are often discarded and within easy reach. I try to keep memories alive that way too.

“Memory Work” assembles a set of paintings carried out over several years. The most recent were painted as part of the 2019 Heimark Artist-in-Residence Program at Brown University's Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice. “Memory Work” examines how different materials, from oil and acrylic paint to coffee grounds, enter into artistic dialogue with one another and make new meanings across space and time.

—Rénold Laurent

BIOGRAPHIE DE L'ARTISTE

Rénold Laurent est né à Source Bretoux, un village situé au pied de la vallée du Marbial, à quelques kilomètres de la ville de Jacmel, en Haïti. Ce petit coin du monde aurait pu exister dans l'obscurité, si ce n'est qu'il a produit quatre des plus célèbres peintres de l'art haïtien: Castera Bazile, Wilmino Domond, Célestin Faustin et Fritzner Lamour. À l'âge de dix ans, Rénold commence à dessiner et à peindre sous la direction de son père, Maccène Laurent. Mais il abandonna bientôt l'art naïf de ses débuts pour mettre en œuvre une nouvelle perspective et de nouvelles techniques dans ses peintures, pour finalement se tourner vers l'abstraction comme mode de communication visuelle. Aujourd'hui, Source Bretoux demeure l'un des rares villages de peintres qui restent en Haïti. Et Renold est l'un de ses premiers peintres abstraits. Il considère la peinture abstraite comme le moyen le plus expressif d'explorer les pouvoirs extraordinaires de l'imagination. Ses œuvres ont été exposées en Haïti, à Cuba, au Mexique, en France et aux États-Unis.

BIOGRAPHY

Rénold Laurent was born in Source Bretoux, a village at the foot of the Marbial Valley—a few kilometers from the city of Jacmel, Haiti. This small corner of the world might have existed in obscurity, except that it produced four of Haiti's most famous painters: Castera Bazile, Wilmino Domond, Célestin Faustin, and Fritzner Lamour. At the age of ten, Rénold began to draw and paint under the direction of his father, Maccène Laurent. But he soon abandoned the “naïve” art of his beginnings to implement a new perspective and new techniques into his paintings, eventually settling on abstraction as his mode of visual communication. Today, Source Bretoux remains one of only a few painter villages left in Haiti, and Rénold is one of its first abstract painters. He views abstract painting as the most expressive means to explore the extraordinary powers of the imagination. His work has been exhibited in Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, France, and the United States.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Memory Work

Haiti is a land of historical and contemporary complexity. Twentieth century Haitian art began by drawing from the Haitian intellectual and cultural movement of indigenism, a movement attentive to everyday Haitian life in the various villages, towns, and cities that today still comprise Haiti. Following this movement, Haitian artists painted Loas (the spirits of Vodou) landscape; portraits of the revolutionary leaders of the dual Haitian revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jacques Des-salines, and Cécile Fatima; and the lives of people in marketplaces or participating in carnival. Iron metal art, which emerged in the 20th century with its careful wrought figures and themes, followed this pattern. The colors and composition of these genres today dominate our conventional understandings of Haitian art.

This exhibition complicates this dominant understanding. Rénoald Laurent practices an abstract art form, one in which materials combine to create new forms. His poetry is encoded in the colors and shapes of his work, yet, in his abstraction, there is what the Caribbean writer Edouard Glissant calls the “concrete presence of things.” For much of Haitian art, painting is an act of freedom that often invokes memory. It is the memory of hope, of possibilities, of what could be but is not, seemingly crushed by political, class, and color authoritarianism and a present in which hope is a cruel mirage. Haitian art confronts the cruel realism of the present and its works of memory create new horizons. So Laurent's work is about the work of memory and its meanings for the present and for a possibility of something different in the future. It is, as he says, a communication between resistance and liberty, thus firmly embedding his art within the traditions of Haitian art.

Anthony Bogue

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FROM "NAÏVE" TO PAINTING ABSTRACTION

A conversation between Anthony Bogues and Rénoald Laurent.¹

*This interview has been edited for clarity and length.
The original interview was conducted in two languages
and interpreted in English.*

FROM THE MARBIAL VALLEY

AB (Anthony Bogues): Tell me a little bit about where you were born?

RL (Rénoald Laurent): I grew up in a small village called Source Bretoux located in the Marbial Valley in the north of Jacmel. The name Marbial was well known due to the first project United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) arts education project established in the 1940s. Parallely, the artists in Marbial were starting to be known at that time but they became better known because of the Marbial UNESCO Project. I decided to practice painting in the community with my father.

AB: How old were you then?

RL: From the time I was 10 years old I learnt to paint from my father, Maccène Laurent, who was taught by his cousin, Domond who in turn learned from Maxin Daumont who was then well known in Marbial. From the 1980s, Source Bretoux became a well known community because of all of the artists it produced. My father had many students. Célestin Faustin,² as well had many students, Wilmino Domond also had many students, so in a sense this village reproduced many painters.

¹ This conversation was facilitated by the Haitian American poet, Patrick Sylvain who introduced me to Rénoald in 2017 while we were together on a visit to Haiti. Patrick was part of the conversation at Brown University in 2019. Many thanks to him for making this project possible. Thanks to Chandra Dickey who transcribed the conversation and did translation where necessary.

² Célestin Faustin (1948–1981) is considered one of the greatest 20th century Haitian painters. While many of his significant works draw from personal anguish their composition is grounded firmly within the traditions of Haitian Art.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATRICK SYLVAIN

AB: Would it be safe to say then that this is a village of painters?

RL: At first you wouldn't describe Source Bretoux as a village of painters, there were only four, five, or six painters, but after the 1990s, you could say, yes.

AB: Did Le Centre d'Art³ in Port-Au-Prince send people out in the 1940s to teach art/painting in that village or in Jacmel, close to the village?

RL: No, Le Centre d'Art did not send teachers however Castera Bazile⁴ who was associated with the Centre was a painter and he was from Marbial. Although we could say that Wilmino Domond was the one who started the genealogy, however, one would have to say that it really began with Castera Bazile because he taught Wilmino as well as his brother Alberoi Bazile. So really in a sense it's really Bazile, and Wilmino then branched out with more students. Although Castera Bazile lived in Port-au-Prince, it was Wilmino who made the trip from Marbial to Port-au-Prince and then returned so he therefore, planted the roots there.

AB: The reason why I ask the question about the influence of Le Centre d'Art is because in the archives of the Centre there is evidence which shows that the Centre sent out teachers and individuals throughout Haiti to teach and to look for painters/artists. And I wondered if this could be part of the explanation for what happens in Source Bretoux.

RL: I do not have all of the data to say that yes indeed Le Centre d'Art sent individuals to different places, including Marbial, however, given what I know, they did not. However

³ Le Centre d'Art was formed in 1944 by the American language teacher, DeWitt Peters along with other Haitian intellectuals like Albert Mangones, Georges Remponeau amongst others. It became in the 1940s and 1950s the central venue for many Haitian artists. From the work of the Centre there emerged a school of art which has been called "naïve." Contrary to many conventional histories of Haitian art, Haitian art did not begin with the formation of the Centre. For a discussion of this see Michel-Philippe Lerebours, *Brief Overview of Two Centuries of Haitian Painting (1804–2004)* (Port-Au-Prince, University of Haiti Press, 2018).

⁴ Castera Bazile (1923–1966) was an important Haitian painter considered to be a key figure in the cohort of the early 20th century masters of what has been called the school of "naïve art."



with Préfète Duffaut in Jacmel, there are two schools or tendencies, one in Jacmel and one in Marbial. In Jacmel its Préfète Duffaut, in Marbial, its Domond. Both of them are influencing "naïve" painting, but both of them are rising at the same time, so maybe the Centre sent folks in Jacmel but not Marbial. There is someone else who was very influential in Jacmel but I cannot remember the name, if the name comes up I'll mention him, but Préfète Duffaut is the one I remember. Ah! I now recall. His name is Poleus Vital and he taught Duffaut.

INFLUENCES

AB: Was your father considered a major painter? Because I remember you telling me when I and others visited you, a story, about your father and your six brothers, and how they are all painters as well.

RL: My father had many customers in Europe, particularly in France because his paintings were in demand since Jacmel was well known. So my father, given that he had many students, I would say that he was well known, but not a major painter, in Haiti. But, within our community, yes. Whenever you mention painting, in Jacmel, technically, you have to talk about the Laurents and Domonds, they are a part of the artistic corpus of Jacmel.



Maccène Laurent, father of Rénoald Laurent.

AB: And they were painting in a style what people call “naïve”?⁵

RL: Yes

AB: Are there any images of your father’s paintings that we could see?

RL: Yes, I think I have some.

AB: And your brothers, in what style did they paint?

RL: My brothers also did the “naïve” style of painting, like my father. I did the same thing and started painting in 1988, in the “naïve” style. However from 1995, based on my encounters with many other painters, I started going to

⁵ The term “naïve” has been used as an art category to describe Haitian painting. It is today a contested term since scholars have argued that it draws its meanings from the categorical hierarchy established in Western art history about the artistic practices of many artists in the Caribbean and Africa. Conventional art history often considers these art practices and their aesthetic as child-like belonging to the school of Primitivism. For a discussion of this see, Anthony Bogues, “Haiti, Art, History, Loas and the Creation of New Forms” in catalog, *The Art of Haiti: Loas, History, and Memory*. (2019: Colorado Fine Arts Museum)

libraries to look at books that broadened my scope and style. Then my style became different, I was influenced directly and indirectly by many people from 1995 onwards.

AB: Who were the painters you were looking at during this period?

RL: I looked at the surrealists, the French painters, the *paysagistes*.

AB: Which French painters particularly did you look at?

RL: Monet and Manet. From 1996 I started reproducing some of Manet’s paintings. This was a period of transition for me. I was doing “naïve” painting and from 1995 onward I began to have my own style, my own voice. Reproducing Manet’s paintings was a transition period where I could leave behind the “naïve” style of paintings.

AB: Were you doing this on your own or where you doing this in conversation with other artists and individuals?

RL: This transition was important for me, because of my geographic trajectory from Marbial to Jacmel, and then from Jacmel to Port-au-Prince. So I was in dialogue with different individuals. Even the purchase of materials, going to various arts stores, meeting different artists in Port-au-Prince, created the opportunities for different conversations. It was through this trajectory of trips, that I was able to meet different artists, even some from Bel Air. While I was going back and forth from Port-au-Prince, I met an important artist in Bel Air whose name was Nicolas Nerette. He introduced me to Emmanuel Pierre-Charles. Emmanuel had an exhibition in Montreal so I sent him one of my paintings in 1997 and he was taken by my work. He said that he saw the evolution of my work from the “naïve” painting to a sort of modernist voice, and encouraged me to continue on this route. Immediately, from there he talked to Philippe Dodard⁶ saying I am going to introduce you to this new painter that you must know. What was paradoxical, was that I had never physically met Emmanuel, all this was through a phone conversation. Through that conversation, he told me I should meet Philippe Dodard. Another coincidence was that I wanted to meet

⁶ Philippe Dodard is a critical painter and cultural figure in Haiti today, for an overview of his work see, Babacar M’Bow (ed) *Philippe Dodard: The Idea of Modernity in Haitian Art* (2009).

Philippe so that he could see my work. So from there, in 1997, after I met with Dodard and Pierre–Charles there is a deep transition away from “naïve” painting into one that is more impressionistic. All this on the way to establish my own style.

AB: Would it be safe to say that all of this happens inside Haiti? And that therefore your transition from so called “naïve” to what you call abstract, is actually a Haitian experience?

RL: Yes, it is a truly a Haitian experience. Because from my different travels between Port-au-Prince and Jacmel, I was able to meet different people, and encounter different techniques, abstract, modernist, and so on. I spent two to four years working on my different techniques before transitioning totally to abstraction, so yes, this was completely influenced by other Haitians.

POETRY AND ART

AB: You are also a poet. How does the poetry influence your painting? Or is it the other way around?

RL: The poetry was already in the paintings in the first instance. During the transition, or during the first phase of my abstract painting, I focused primarily on theory but the poetry was already embedded. Not only was I focused on painters like Marc Chagall⁷ and Wassily Kandinsky⁸ but also some American painters.

AB: Like?

RL: Roy Lichtenstein and Jackson Pollock. In looking at these serious styles, I was not only focusing on abstract painting but a kind of speech or narrative that is embedded in the paintings, I wanted to decode what was encoded in the paintings. Not only the abstract aspects but also the speech and narrative. In 2000 I met a Haitian poet named Christophe Philippe Charles, and he is the reason why I became interested in poetry. I started to read poetry and this added another layer to my art, and this is how I began decoding what was encoded in the art. I could see how poetry influences painters and painters influence poets. But also, the notions of the abstract

⁷ Marc Chagall (1887–1985) was an early modernist French-Jewish painter.

⁸ Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1900) was a Russian painter and art theorist.



Laurent's studio and library in Haiti.

became important, and discourse became unified. From there I went back and forth between poetry and painting because the language in abstraction is already established.

AB: What you are describing is remarkable. It's a theoretical construction about questions of discourse and representation. But representation that has no referent to external reality which is what makes it abstract. So I'm trying to think of your work as therefore not just painting but as a certain kind of language that is constructed through color and composition, which then calls upon us as viewers to decode. Do you ever reflect upon your own work? Your own process of painting?

RL: Not really. Sometimes through the process of establishing or realizing a work I may have a long pull back. In a sense the pull back is one into myself, so introspection, but it's also trying to assimilate what is going on around me while trying to figure out what the artwork is saying as well.

AB: When I met you in Haiti you talked about a group of

young people, like yourself who you collaborated with. Does that group still exist, do you all still work together in some way?

RL: There is a slowdown in terms of artistic control and production, and the artists interests. But we still try to meet. People come in and out of the group, it is very fluid, it's changing. However, I think at least once a year there is a meeting between the artists.

AB: I want to now come to some of the art for this show. There are various schools of Haitian art, there's not just one homogenous school of Haitian art. There's the so called "naïve," there's the school of beauty. There is the historical school from the North historically formed by Obin; then there is the school of poetic realism and of course cruel realism along with various other schools.⁹ However, your work doesn't fall into any of these although in color composition it is recognizably Haitian. It falls into a category we can call abstract. So I want to talk to you about how you see yourself, and how do you locate your art. Have you thought about your work in relationship to say, all of these other schools that I've just listed?

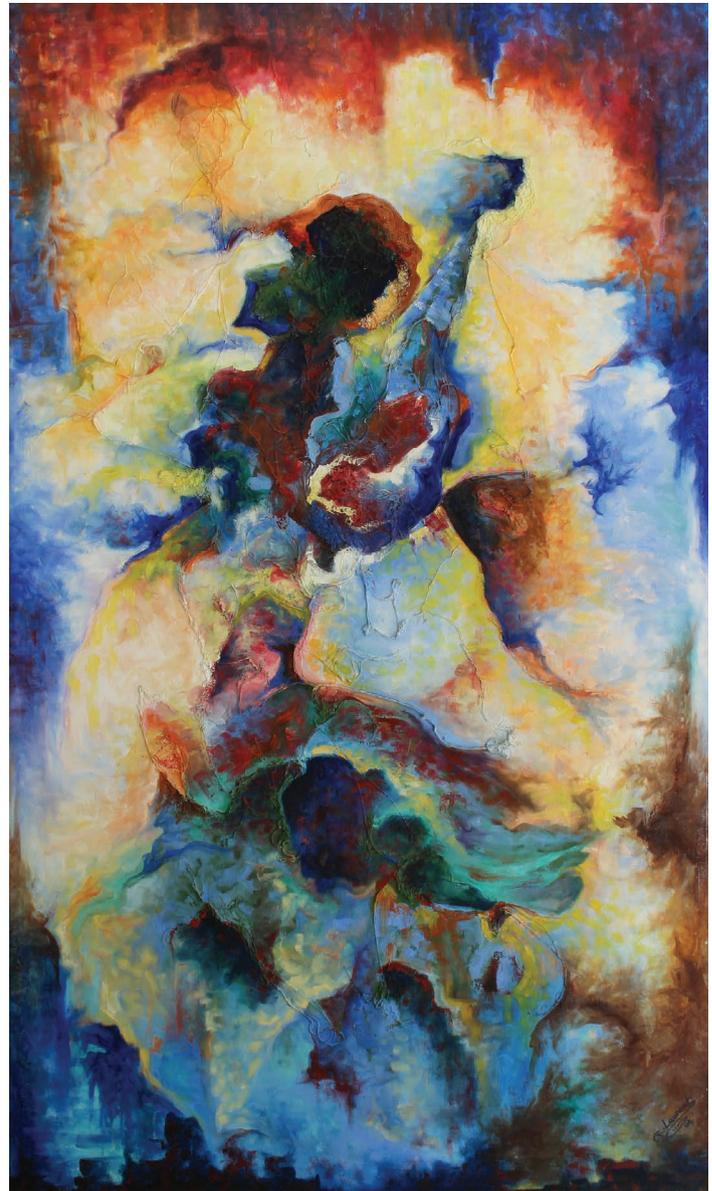
RL: It is very difficult to look at myself in all or some of these schools.

AB: But not looking at yourself in the schools, how do you position yourself in relationship to them?

RL: In a sense I came from the "naïve." Then at one period of time I had an adoration for marvelous realism.¹⁰ In a sense I

⁹For a brief discussion of some of the various schools of art see, *Brief Overview of Two Centuries of Haitian Painting (1804–2004)*.

¹⁰Marvelous realism was the term deployed by the radical Haitian intellectual Stephen Alexis in the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris to describe Haitian art and culture. The term obviously draws from a set of debates in the late 1940s and early 1950s between Caribbean intellectuals including Alejo Carpentier from Cuba and Rene Menil from Martinique. However the debates go back to an earlier period in Haitian intellectual history with the writings of Jacques Roumain. There is in 1956 a debate between Rene Depestre and the Martinican poet and political personality Aime Cesaire about the aesthetics of Negritude in contrast to that of marvelous realism. For a discussion of these issues and the history of the category of marvelous realism see, Anthony Bagues, "History, Marvelous Realism and the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrie" unpublished paper delivered at the Clement Foundation, Martinique, August 2018.



Liberty guide le people | *Liberty Guides the People*
2004, Oil on Canvas, 30"x 50"

am not part of any school. I am at a stage where perhaps I am waiting to see if there's going to be a new school that could take me in, because right now I could say yes, I am on my own creating but perhaps there is a school right now creating that I could be a part of, but I don't know. Voluntarily or involuntarily, I was influenced by various schools, and I do have great appreciation for various schools. But right now I'm on my own.

LIBERTY GUIDES THE PEOPLE

AB: I ask that because when you begin to look at the paintings, let's take for example, *Liberty Guides the People*, the colors that are used are those often seen in the marvelous realism genre of Haitian paintings. The title could be any title from a particular Haitian painter, you know say, that of L'Ouverture Poisson¹¹ or artists who are preoccupied with the Haitian Revolution. So one is trying to think about what's distinctive about your work which is, at the same time rooted within a Haitian reality. For example look at the red, which is very important, blue which is important. And I remember that your studio in Maribel was covered with paintings in which the color blue and red were dominant.

RL: The color blue started to be extremely important to me from about 2000 when I started to study some of the Haitians who were exhibited at the College Saint Pierre, St. Peters College. For example Luckner Lazard was one of the painters that I loved very much because of the many shades of blue in his paintings. I think I was influenced by blue first, and then the red. The way that the colors are layered is very much influenced by the "naïve" way of painting. My father's paintings have a multiplicity of colors, one character could have three colors. I use colors as a means of layering, playing off one another and to create a world.

AB: So that it is Haitian colors, drawing from the so called "naive," but it does not have the representivity or the character of the portraiture or landscape.

¹¹ Louverture Poisson (1914–1985) Considered an important 20th century artist who was associated with the Le Centre d'Art he painted one of the most significant representations of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony which is said to have inaugurated the Haitian Revolution in August 1791.

RL: No there isn't any of that sort of representation. It's more of a global gaze. It is more of a sphere, a perimeter, so it's reflecting on those things.

AB: Sphere and perimeter. Okay, so, how do you see the *Liberty* painting?

RL: Often, I did not start with an idea. I think that I started with the idea that I was going to attempt to do something, and this the attempt gives me a sort of projection. For example, while I am in my world with the painting, and as the painting is evolving and progressing, the spectators, or the people who are looking at my work are in dialogue and are saying "ah, this is what I see!" even though I myself do not see it that way. But towards the end there is indeed a kind of dialogue that's happening in which I'm starting to see what they're saying although I was not there at the beginning.

AB: So why did you call this painting *Liberty*?

RL: I think that maybe it's because that painting started in 2003 or 2004, given the political context, and the thematic of the painting became historical, or was in conversation with historical themes.

AB: This current exhibition is called *Memory Work*. How do you want us to think about this, an entire exhibition as *Memory Work*?

RL: In the first instance I am thinking in terms of themes, historical themes and then themes that have to do with liberty, going back to 2004. Also associated with this, is a theme of resistance. So that there will be in the exhibition paintings that will deal with a thematic of resistance as well. Given all of the reflection or political thoughts I've had over the two decades, the two themes that are merging are resistance and liberty and these will merge in this exhibition.

AB: Thank you very much for this interesting conversation and sharing insights on your work.

RL: Thank you.

POETRY BY RÉNOLD LAURENT

lè m' fèmen zye m'
mwen santi zetwal yo sou popyè m'
lalin klere mwal tèt mwen
reyon yo ap pale nan kolòn vètebral mwen

mwen tande bwi chak ti wòch
kap woule devan vag yo
mwen tande kri chak ti gout dlo
kap dòlote wòch yo

chak ti grenn sab
k'ap plenyen nan kè yo
k'ap lave zye
sou rivaj yo

lè m' fèmen zye m'
mwen wè pase m' kap gazouye l'
sou chemen kolonyal yo
nan po yon depòte

mwen santi lemond nan mwen
mwen anvè rete tan an
mwen anvè fwete tan an
pou m' donte l'

lè m' fèmen zye m'
mwen santi vil yo nan tout kò m'
ap kouri degidon
mwen pa vle bliye anyen

(Ekstrè nan "Onondipè" –
Ed. Choucounè - 2017)

*when I close my eyes
I feel the stars on my eyelids
the moon illuminates the top of my head
the rays are talking in my spine*

*I hear the sound of each pebble
rolling in front of the waves
I hear the cries of each drop of water
pampering the rocks*

*each grain of sand
complaining in their hearts
washing eyes
on their shores*

*when I close my eyes
I see my past stirring itself
on the colonial paths
in the skin of a deportee*

*I feel the world in me
I desire to stop time
I desire to whip time
to tame it*

*when I close my eyes
I feel the towns in my whole body
are running aimlessly
I don't want to forget anything*

From Onondipè (Port-au-Prince,
Haiti: Editions Choucounè, 2017).

youn pa youn
yon reflè endefini
yon moun sou ak pwisans
ak mirak
nan yon dlo lanmè briyan

navigab
imaj reyèl yo
yon klète vwale
bèl
tyèd

enstab koulè
yon roz envizib
ki kaptire yon ble kouvri ak nèj
rankontre ak reflè syèl la
nan elwayman
yon mov pasajè

(Ekstrè nan “Paroles En Relief” –
Ed. Choucounè - 2008)

*one by one
a hazy reflection
of a man drunk with power
and miracles
in the illuminated waters of the sea*

*navigable
the tangible images
a veiled clarity
marvelous
warm*

*of unstable color
an elusive rose
that captures a snowy blue
in contact with the sky's reflection
in the distance
a fugitive mauve*

(From “Lyrics in Relief” –
Ed. Choucounè - 2008)

THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY OF RÉNOLD LAURENT

INTRODUCTION

Haitian art has never been so diverse and we'd do well to believe it doesn't intend on reaching a breaking point in the realization of its possibilities. The closure of the only art museum and the confinement of galleries to the single neighborhood of Pétiion-Ville since the January 12, 2010 earthquake might suggest a sort of stagnation in artistic practice. And yet, everything moves. Despite a lack of guidance and the challenging state of the art market, artists continue their work. Artistic output aspires to be both engaged and inventive. Among the most inventive artistic work is that of Rénold Laurent. As a visual artist, poet, and novelist, his art is part of an ongoing search. From the outset, he always refused ease, spontaneity, or improvisation.

Rénold's artistic journey has been both rigorous and rapid. He has constructed his art with soberness and discipline. Can one speak of phases in Laurent's art practice? Refusing any idea of art that emerges from spontaneity, he's inclined towards an aesthetic achieved through gradualness. His introduction to art historian Michel Philippe Lerebours was decisive to this approach. It was at this point he realized that art can only be a methodic construction. Thus, he began taking up the great masters of Western art in order to perfect his technique. In this sense, he was above all influenced by Manet. However after some time, figurativism could no longer provide the necessary momentum for his creative vision. From 2005–2007, he exhausts himself working in and through Kandinsky's interpretation of abstract lyricism. And from this process his style surges forth. Clouds of color emerge from the canvas, expressing the extreme fragility of human things. While not wanting to represent reality, his work emerges from the human condition of tragedy. His artwork is constructed like a fog of colors, and in a slow movement, forms appear and timidly fade to make room for others. One cannot forget abstractions the color of fire where the canvas becomes a field invaded by streams of lava exploding in sparks.

ARTISTIC THEMES

Rénold Laurent's artistic journey inspires a lot of interest and many questions. The thematic diversity of his artwork seems to make him an unclassifiable artist, sometimes misunderstood. He isn't attached to any particular gallery, but that isn't as much of a disadvantage in Haiti as it's typical even for the most well-known artists. What's surprising is that he's never been exhibited by a gallery in Haiti, despite recognition by the biggest art institutions, namely the Musée d'Art Haïtien and Centre d'Art. In effect, if Laurent's work disturbs, it's because of both its variety and resistance. If his work addresses traditional terms of Haitian modernism, like market scenes or popular expressions of Haitian culture such as "*rara*" or "*trèse riban*," or even abstraction (which seems to be his true path) it has also distanced itself from this modernity; for this reason art critic Webert Lahens has situated Laurent's artwork in the history of artistic postmodernism in Haiti. Through his abstraction, Laurent makes a new proposition. His work is an act of resistance. Looking at the artists of his generation, one could say Laurent assumes the figure of a UFO. He completely refuses the forms and colors his contemporaries adore. One could say that he is from another time, "*le tien*"; but while relying on a time that has already existed, he surpasses it. Thus the question, what is Rénold Laurent's place in contemporary Haitian art? And can his artistic journey help us to answer it?

Despite his technical evolution and his preference for abstraction due to hours spent drawing and reproducing the French impressionists of the 19th century, he remains attached to the initial themes of his training. Raised in a family of painters, from childhood Laurent took up the stylized forms that his father and brothers were drawing and painting: scenes of everyday life where people are most often placed in rustic landscapes and space is reduced to a bare minimum. But encountering Lerebours at the end of the 1990s marked an occasion that would change his conception of art and give his artistic practice its true momentum. This meeting was a confirmation of his artistic vocation. It's at this time he

began to study. Lerebours' library offered him everything, from philosophical aesthetics and the aesthetic vision of Etienne Souriau and his followers, to the major currents in global and Haitian art history. He devoured novels and poetry, and thus, began writing. He published several collections of poetry with Choucouné Edition whose owner is none other than Christophe Charles, one of the most famous poets in contemporary Haitian literature.

With a preference for the impressionists, and more specifically, portraiture and still-life, he worked on his drawing skills by copying the masters, theoretically and practically exploring major artistic movements. For a while, he looked for a means of expression through realistic forms. Towards the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, going against the trends popular among artists of his generation, he chose abstraction. He refuses to paint in search of direct representation, whether it be realistic or figurative. Hereafter, it's more a question of meaning than saying. He offers us a more interior kind of painting, one that speaks to the soul, where forms seem to peer into our deepest emotions, and give the strange sensation that the world is a great blue background on which lines and colors play. In certain pieces, the colors seem to spring from nowhere; the shapes appear tormented by some sort of tragedy. The struggle of colors—peaceful here, violent there—gives rhythm, directing the gaze while interrogating what it means to see. But how many times have we not witnessed this majestic layout, which explodes the usual circle, where forms are taken up in a network that propels them towards a new reality, however elusive it may be, mistaken as easy or low-brow? The movements are slow and orderly, testimonies not to a found serenity or satisfied soul, but rather a disciplined spirit dreaming of order.

COLORS AND TECHNIQUE

At other times, Rénoald more aggressively expresses his concerns, transforming them into a kind of revolt. In these cases, despite the presence of vertical lines that provide a degree of measure to the movements, shapes flutter and colors flow, streaming into one another. Everything degenerates. Total agitation prevails. The rhythm strikes like emotions tearing themselves apart. By 2006–2007, Laurent began experimenting with new materials, such as coffee or the integration of

found objects into his pieces. In 2008, he presented the works that emerged from this experience to the public at his first major exhibition and the last major exhibition curated by the Centre d'Art before its destruction in the earthquake of January 12, 2010.

The public discovers his audacious dichromatic technique. If black and white pervade his paintings, he uses them as an opportunity to execute a total art. This total art is made through collage and recuperated materials, always worked with a certain finesse. Thanks to *marouflage*, and to a collage technique that gives depth to his pieces, the canvas becomes painting and sculpture simultaneously, placing it at the cutting edge of visual expression.

This effort to create a total art makes him an artist of synthesis and a great illustrator and fashion design teacher. His skill for abstract painting would be the envy of even the genre masters, however figurativism remains a *cheval de bataille* of the highest importance. We can then say that the figurative remains an anchoring point in his work, a source of inspiration even if, at the end, his major pieces are non-figurative.

Rénoald Laurent is undoubtedly a treasure in contemporary Haitian art. Tireless in his pursuit, each piece is a step toward the unknown, towards the search for a world where exploration remains endless. His work is part of an approach that interrogates artistic practice in its entirety. He brings into question the relationship between painting and other art forms, whether he practices them or not. For him, art is the only means of understanding the things that happen and the things that remain. His practice is an effort in constant renewal, one that outright refuses ease or compromise.

Dichromatic experimentation permitted Laurent to invent a style less evocative in regards to color, but one that offers us works of astonishing brilliance in the imaginative and suggestive force they elicit. If the variation in color and the play of gradation are diminished, we dare to argue that we are in the presence of another conception of the artist and his art entirely. He has completely unleashed his own audacity. If art still must devote itself to harmony, it isn't in the homogeneity of the materials and even less so in the grandeur of the substances themselves. Now, he doesn't hesitate to integrate

objects into his paintings—or better yet his *tableaux*. When painting is incorporated, it's only in order to accentuate certain features: a bra, a piece of tissue or jean, wood etc. Through the breath of his imagination, recuperated objects, trash that had already reached its final destination in landfills, acquire a new life. These works of assemblage for some, collage for others, mix artistic mediums. If, in his aesthetic quest, Laurent returns to collage or to assemblage, it's by no means a playful do-it-yourself project nor a means of simply jarring the gaze. To the contrary, the elaboration of his form is harmonic and always brings the gaze towards a center. Situating himself in the wake of those who wanted to break the boundaries between art forms, or better yet, the artistic and the non-artistic, Laurent shows the richness in the encounter between diverse elements. Perhaps this is why he stripped his landscapes: in order to make room for the bare necessities. Once integrated into the landscape, once the objects become forms, they seem as though they no longer want to announce themselves as individual entities. They adapt to the point where they forget themselves. We interpret this integration not as a loss of individuality, but rather as an encounter of several individualities in the midst of shedding their differences—a utopic interpretation perhaps! Moreover, it's clear in Laurent's work that he doesn't attempt to hide the nature of the objects. The initial form releases itself entirely, taking its place in the whole.

QUEST AND TRANSFORMATION

In essence, the aesthetic force of Laurent's artwork, without wanting to reduce it, can be approached from three angles: the quest to transform materials, the synthesis of various artistic currents, and technical innovation. Laurent pursues a form of mixture where the artistic and the non-artistic rub shoulders. The impact of this mixture on our prevailing artistic sensibilities is often unsettling, but it permits the total integration of environment into art. Whether we like it or not, art is a medium for understanding nature; it always interrogates our existence. And we often feel overwhelmed by the weight of our questions. Nature seems too big; in order for us to explain it, we try to fragment it. Laurent studied the artistic movements that wanted to fragment nature in order to understand it, but he did not follow them. His vision, in my opinion, yearns to

be total. This is probably what he intends to wrest from the heterogeneity of his materials. Laurent rarely gives a title to his pieces—and this isn't a passing fad either. For him, art is just as much a manner of living as it is a way of doing. And life is mysterious; an ethereal thing that I cannot picture for myself without the sadness of lying to myself. Yet, Laurent never blames life. To the contrary, he represents it with grandeur of the work itself. One of the rare pieces he has titled is called “Waves.” We're here caught up in our circumstances and it's in confronting them that we get, if not the opportunity to know ourselves than at least the chance to evaluate our possibilities. Herein lies the greatness of life—it always enables this possibility for reflection.

In reality, Laurent never abandoned color. Three foundational events of his artistic career allowed him to return to the public with artwork rich in color and confirmed his place in the Haitian artworld. First, he was chosen by the directors of the l'Institut d'Etudes et de Recherches Africaines d'Haïti de l'Université d'Etat d'Haïti to produce a wall fresco in 2013. It was created in collaboration with Philippe Antoine, art professor at the l'Ecole Nationale des Arts à Port-au-Prince. The fresco is four by two meters, revealing the true scope of his talent as an artist. If he had already familiarized the public in Jacmel with his large scale works, it was the first time that the people of Port-au-Prince had the opportunity to reflect on a piece of this scale. This project had such a positive impact on the university community that the directors of the institute organized a large exhibit for Laurent entitled *Expression and Abstraction* in 2015 where he was connected with a sculptor from Riviere Froide named Karim Bleus. This exhibit received extraordinary media coverage. On this occasion, Laurent had the opportunity to meet Simil, a treasured giant of artistic modernism in Haiti, who praised Laurent's discipline and extensive knowledge of colors. The next year, in June 2014, he was invited to participate in the 34th edition of the “Fiesta del Fuego” at the Casa del Caribe de Santiago de Cuba. One of Laurent's pieces was depicted on the cover of the catalogue, “Caminos Poeticos” which brought together the work of Cuban and Haitian poets. Once again, the experience in Cuba allowed him to question his work and his conception of art. He returned from this trip with works dominated by a fiery yellow color. This was the first time in Laurent's work that

a real presence of the color yellow emerged. At the level of form, he became more sensitive to symbols. From there, he mixed his lyricism with geometric symbols.

His last major exhibition in Haiti took place at the Cultural Center of Brazil. More than thirty works were exhibited. The exhibit benefited from several newspaper articles. Two notable conferences have been convened by two art historians, Jean Herald Legagneur and Sterlin Ulysse. These conferences have sparked a lot of debate on the question of abstract art in the history of Haitian art, and created a real dialogue between artists, theorists, and the public.

Today, Laurent moves towards a much more hectic, more disturbing form of abstraction. The entirety of his work tries to organize itself around a force of constant movement, whether it be a circle, or a sphere, or a spiral. When the forms are not captured by waves, they are caught by spirals that deform them. The agitated atmosphere of Laurent's most recent works plunges us into the chaos of a beginning or of an end. One is always in the midst of this ambiguity, because at the same time things are erupting, they're organizing themselves. The spheres, the spirals, what purpose do they serve if not the regeneration of beings caught in waves?

The artist, we can say, is a "ame en peine" (soul in pain). He doesn't stop forcing doors open; at each moment of his existence, he asks himself "What can man still do?... What else does he have to say?" (A. Gide, *L'Immoraliste*). No artist can, in my opinion, escape these questions. The artist has challenges to overcome. He has the weight of civilization, of society, of art itself on his back. The artist does not have a choice. He must invent a word, another manner of speech, a language heretofore unknown, neglected or perhaps more modestly, not yet explored. The artist defies evidence until it makes him lose his charm. The risk is enormous, especially when we know that art emerges from a serious life and yet must commit itself to the man who asks for a little leisure and entertainment to keep his spirits high. Laurent assumes the risk. He offers us an art that has nothing to do with amusement; an art that questions the depth of our oldest categories. He broke the boundaries of our artistic sensibilities. His work asks us not only to see, but to hear, and above all, to feel; the language of his pieces engages us in a dialogue concerning

the living man, the unknown, the lost one, the adventurer who leaves his head full of illusions and heads towards the dark horizon.

The artistic journey of Rénoald Laurent is not only an aesthetic search: it's also a quest for the self. If his visual work is a constant evolution, in order to break boundaries, he had to do it in his own life by pursuing several forms of artistic expression. And if he was born in a family of painters, he is the first and the only to overcome technical and social obstacles in order to evolve his art. His birthplace, in the south east of Haiti near Jacmel, has given Haitian art several of its most cherished artists, including Le Domond and Celestin Faustin. If the area still possesses artists and artisans who combine gardening or other concerns with the practice of art, there's no one highlighting this generational interest in artistic creation. There's a reason Laurent founded the *Centre Culture Soley Leve*. He always wanted to help people, and more specifically children, to realize the importance of the relationship between art and life. He has put his popularity as an artist in the service of his community. It's this sense of commitment that attracted the team of "France O," a French television program, when they decided to report on this center. The artistic journey of Rénoald Laurent is above all else an effort to open, to encounter the other. This is perhaps the best explanation of his evolution to an abstraction methodically researched. Thus, his return to the figurative from time to time should not be understood as a need for inspiration as much as a return to origins in order to continually surge forth.

Sterlin Ulysse

Historien de l'art / Spécialiste en Esthétique

Vice doyen à la Recherche de IERAH/ISERSS,
Université d'Etat d'Haïti

Dr. Sterlin Ulysse received his PhD at L'Ecole Normale Supérieure—Université d'Etat d'Haïti, Port-au-Prince in Ibero-American studies with a concentration in art and literature. Currently, he is Vice-Dean of research at Institute of African Studies and Research in the Higher Institute of Studies and Research in Social Science at the State University of Haiti. He also works with the FRAMESPA (France, Americas, Spain—Societies, Powers, Actors) laboratory at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès where he researches the forms and figures of contemporary art in Haiti.

MEMORY WORK

RÉNOLD LAURENT



NÉGRIER 2 | SLAVE SHIP 2
2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 30" x 40"



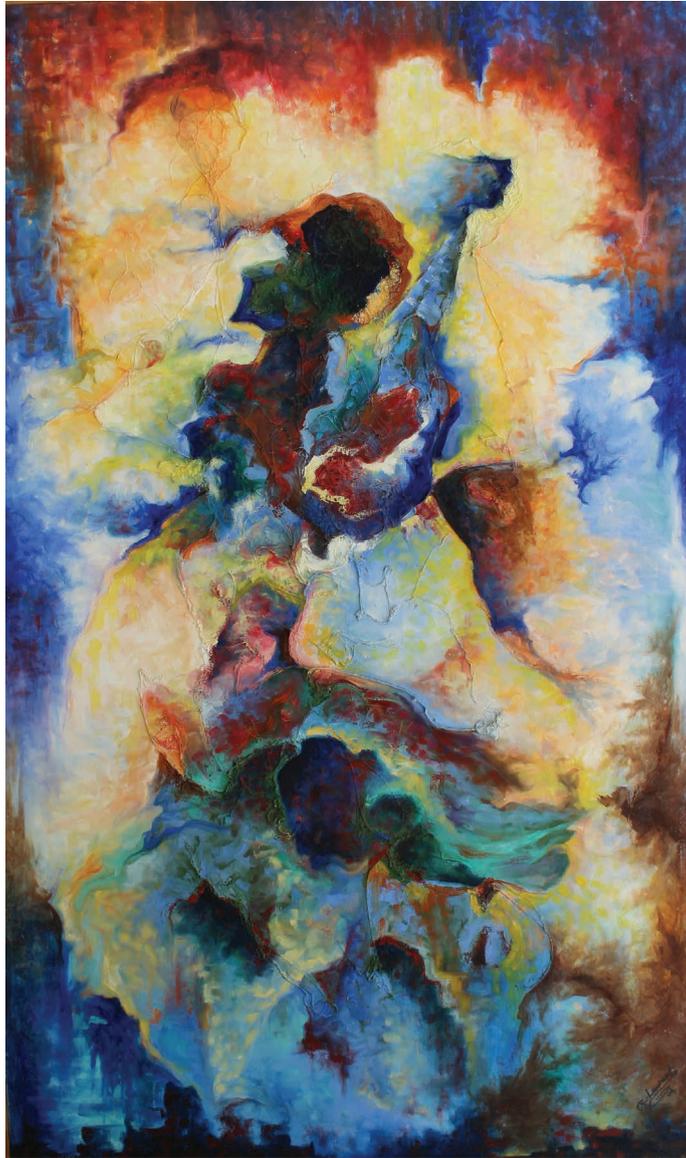
MUTATION | *MUTATION*
2001, Oil on Canvas, 24"x 58"



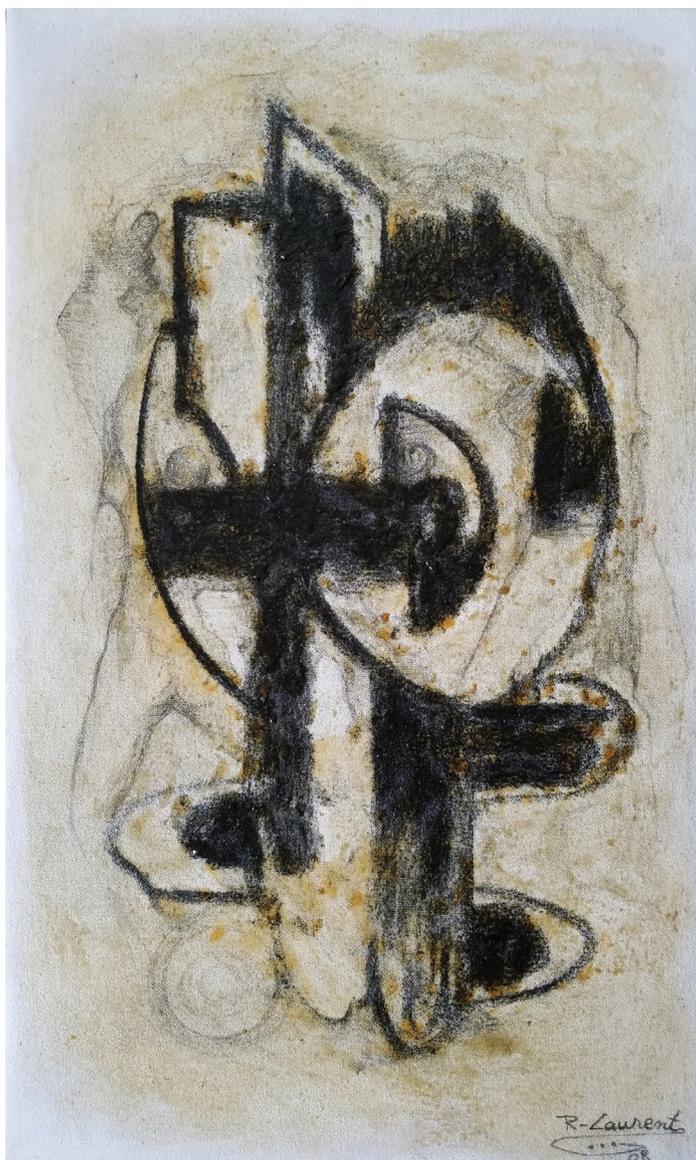
MATERNITÉ 1 | *MATERNITY 1*
2001, Oil on Canvas, 30"x 40"



MATERNITÉ 2 | *MATERNITY 2*
2001, Oil on Canvas, 30"x 40"



LIBERTÉ GUIDE LE PEOPLE | *LIBERTY GUIDES THE PEOPLE*
2004, Oil on Canvas, 30"x 50"



SANS TITRE | *UNTITLED*

2008, Mixed Media on Canvas, 12"x 20"



SANS TITRE | *UNTITLED*

2008, Mixed Media on Canvas, 10"x 32"



L'INNOCENT | *THE INNOCENT*
2011, Mixed Media on Canvas, 20"x 30"



LE DÉPLOIEMENT | *THE UNFURLING*
2009, Mixed Media on Canvas, 30"x 50"



MASQUE | MASK
2001, Mixed Media on Canvas, 20"x 24"



SANS TITRE | *UNTITLED*

2007, Mixed Media on Canvas, 16"x 20"



SANS TITRE | *UNTITLED*
2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 14"x 32"



LES DANSEUSES | *THE DANCERS*
2005, Oil on Canvas, 30"x 50"



CÉLÉBRATION | *CELEBRATION*
2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 60" x 30"

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS OF RÉNOLD LAURENT

- 2018 | Individual Exhibition, Mary L. Fifield Gallery at Bunker Hill Community College; Boston, MA; May 21–July 27.
- 2017 | Group Exhibition, “Haiti aux Grands Voisins,” organized by Haiti Futur and Haiti Action Artistes; Paris, France; June 21–25.
- 2015 | Individual Exhibition at the Brazil/Haiti Cultural Center; Petionville, Haiti; April 10–30.
- 2014 | Individual Exhibition at the Casa del Joven Creador; Santiago, Cuba; July 3–12.
- 2013 | Group Exhibition, “Haitian Art in Transit,” Logan Airport; Boston, MA; January–March.
- 2012 | Group Exhibition, “Mémoire d’une ville imaginaire,” Nantes, France; January–February.
- 2008 | Individual Exhibition, Centre d’Art, Port-au-Prince, Haiti; April 25–May 9.
- 2006 | Individual Exhibition at the French Cultural Center; Jacmel, Haiti; April 28–May 5.
- 2005 | Group Exhibition, “Tendance de la jeune peinture haïtienne,” the Haitian Art Museum; Port-au-Prince, Haiti; May–September.
- 2002 | Group Exhibition at the Watercolor International Biennial, The Watercolor Museum; Mexico City, Mexico; November–December.
- 1998 | 1st prize in a painting contest organized by the French Cultural Center to commemorate the city of Jacmel’s 300th anniversary; March.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SLAVERY & JUSTICE

About the Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice

The Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (CSSJ) is a scholarly research center with a public humanities mission. Recognizing that racial and chattel slavery were central to the historical formation of the Americas and the modern world, the CSSJ creates a space for the interdisciplinary study of the historical forms of slavery while also examining how these legacies shape our contemporary world. Our renovated 19th century building at 94 Waterman Street includes a gallery exhibition space, the stunning glass wall art piece *Rising to Freedom*, and a symbolic slave garden. For more information, please visit: brown.edu/slaveryjustice

About the Heimark Artist in Residence Program

The Heimark Artist in Residence program brings to campus musicians, poets, visual artists, and performers whose work grapples with the legacies of slavery on our world today. Prior recipients of the residency include the Marian Anderson String Quartet, poet Evie Shockley, playwright Jaymes Jorsling, performance artist ChE Ware, and printmaker Jessica Hill. The Heimark Artist in Residence program is generously supported by Libby '76 P'11, P'14, P'17 and Craig Heimark '76, P'11, P'14, P'17.

SELECTED READINGS

Donald Cosentino, *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st Century Haitian Art*

Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*

Rose-Marie Desruisseau, *La Rencontre des Trois Mondes*
(The Encounter of Three Worlds)

Jeremy Matthew Glick, *Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics,
and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution*

Edwidge Danticat & Jonathan Demme, *Island on Fire*

Alain Foubert, *Forgerons du Vodou* (Blacksmiths of Vodou)

Michelson Paul Hyppolite, *A Study of Haitian Folklore*

Gerlad Alxeis, *Peintres Haïtiens*

Babacar M'bow, *Philippe Dodard: The Idea of Modernity in Haitian
Contemporary Art*

Candice Russll, *Masterpieces of Haitian Art*

Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*

Davenport Museum of Art & Karen McCarthy Brown, *Tracing the Spirit:
Ethnographic Essays on Haitian Art*

Anthony Bogues, *From Revolution in the Tropics to Imagined Landscapes:
The Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié*

Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of the Bones*

Laurent Du Bois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Center is deeply appreciative to Libby and Craig Heimark for making this artist in residency possible. It has allowed the Center's work in the arts to flourish. We would like to express our gratitude to Patrick Sylvain for the many hours spent helping with translation as well as graduate students Chandra Dickey and Felicia Bishop Denaud. Additionally the Center would like to thank our exhibition design team at Erin Wells Design including Erin Wells, Elise Kirk and Mark Foster, as well as exhibition installer Ben Kaplan. Lastly we acknowledge the CSSJ staff that worked on this exhibition and catalogue, Shana Weinberg, Maiyah Rivers, and Catherine Van Amburgh. This has been a collective effort.



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& **JUSTICE**